

Pentecost 5, Year C
June 27, 2010
Luke 9:51-62
Bill Ellis

In our gospel text for today St. Luke has grouped three sayings into a very short lesson on the cost of discipleship. The result is remarkably harsh; indeed, it is difficult to imagine anything in the words attributed to Jesus that would be more foreign to our middle class ears, more alien to our hopes and aspirations than the text we have before us just now. One person comes up to Jesus with an unconditional promise to follow him. Rather than accepting this offer he reminds the person that to do so is to become homeless. He summons two others to his service, and both declare their willingness to become his disciples, but each requests a moment to fulfill what any of us here would consider to be very modest, even minimal duties. Yet Jesus refuses; you may not bury your father, you may not even say good bye to those you love and still consider yourself fit for the kingdom of God.

We won't understand this passage completely if we don't see that these words clearly echo the 1st Kings passage we also heard this morning where Elijah is scandalized by Elisha's desire to say goodbye to his own parents before following in the great prophet's footsteps. Elisha made up for that mistake by slaughtering his oxen and burning the plow lest anyone imagine he

was entertaining even the slightest desire to return to his former life. This scene is clearly in the background of today's passage from Luke, and provides its context. We need to understand, in other words, that Jesus didn't make up these sayings, though he may have invoked them. They were part of the tradition of the people, and meant to convey a stern warning to all who followed in the prophetic tradition of the people of Israel that there must be nothing whatsoever that stands between the servant and his - or her - devotion to the message they are sent to proclaim. No home, no ritual duties, no ties of kinship may ever distract the disciple from the work that lies ahead. "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." That is the word for today.

Those of us who have homes and families and friends – not to mention bank accounts and investments - that we are not about to abandon for any reason whatsoever have two reasonable ways to respond to this word. First we may ignore the message altogether, granting ourselves the complete freedom to be as faithful as we can be, which is not nearly as faithful as Elisha or any of that first generation of disciples who ended their lives either in exile or as martyrs. We might even frown slightly at those who take these things that seriously, and remind ourselves that this sort of anti-social behavior verges on an unseemly fanaticism.

The second way of responding is to indulge ourselves in a moment of feeling guilty. We might imagine that this very unwillingness to live exactly like Elisha, or Jesus for that matter, demonstrates that there really is something deficient and sinful about us, and that therefore we really aren't fit for the kingdom of God. Of these two common ways of responding to this passage and others like it in scripture, I have long tended toward the second way. I have often found something perversely gratifying in the feeling of being totally inadequate to fulfill the demands of my calling as a priest or even as a human being, and it isn't hard to find others who, in their genuine and heartfelt desire to be faithful, which is a good and holy desire, indulge themselves in the same way as I.

But I hope we all here can understand that both these responses, as common and as reasonable as they are, are in fact straw men that deserve to be burned up and abandoned. For if all we can do is react with disdain and not engagement to a text of scripture, then we can be sure we have misunderstood it. And similarly, if all we can do is feel guilty and hopeless without also becoming inspired then we are can be equally sure we are on the wrong track. So as popular as both these responses are, we who indulge in them need to look farther.

For this text is not ridiculous, nor is it a blanket condemnation of everyone with a home and a family. Jesus himself relied heavily on people with

homes and families, and more than once noted the great faith he saw in those shared lives. By the same token he called people to free themselves from the sort of slavery to things that destroys the human spirit renders those enslaved unable to realize their best and highest selves. And it is this fact which enables us to find the context for understanding what is being said to us today.

What we have today is emphatically not a call to give up everything we have and embrace both the direst poverty and the most complete loneliness in the mistaken belief that this is what gets us closer to God. This sort of idea actually vindicates Nietzsche's critique of Christianity as an ethos of resentment, as a system that punishes those who are great for the sake of those who are not. What we have instead is something very nearly the opposite of that. What is demanded today is that we abandon ourselves to the task of living fully, that we spend ourselves in the service of God whose will for us is that we become able to love and care for one another as we have been cared for by God. What is demanded moreover is that we cease living as though we need to protect ourselves from a world that seems hostile to our needs and powerful enough to crush us at any minute, and instead begin to use what we have not as protection from this hostile world, but as invitation to the formation of communities of shared life on an ever wider scale.

There is, in other words, no requirement in this passage that we throw away everything we have ever gotten for the sake of some ascetic of

poverty and isolation. That is a notion worthy of disdain, as a matter of fact. There is however in this passage the call to cease being defined by our fears about what the world will do to us and thus to free ourselves from slavery to the possessions we mistakenly believe will protect us from our own limitations and vulnerability.

Likewise there is in this passage no requirement that we abandon our important and nurturing connections to family, to friends, to country, to church and religion, connections that sustain us in important and life giving ways. But there is in this passage the requirement that we abandon the sort of idolatry that inevitably emerges when we make those connections absolute, and declare to ourselves and others that God's blessing stands upon us in a way that makes us infallible, and our ways reflective of the only possible faithful society.

Finally, there is in this passage no requirement that we abandon that work which we find gratifying and productive, but there is in this passage the call give up forever the temptation to see ourselves so completely defined by that work that the essential humanity we share with all other people becomes obscured and even lost, rendering us in the process incapable of understanding our true place both before God and others.

In essence the point is this. To the extent that we find what we have to be worth preserving either for the protection it gives us from the world or simply as a value in itself, we are indeed servants of another master, and indeed

it might not be too strong to suggest we are the slaves of that master. To the extent that our principle concern is the maintenance of a certain life style or membership in a certain class, there too we find that we have traded some freedom for the sake of security, and are to some extent like those people we encountered today whose loyalty to Christ was conditional. But to the extent that we use what we use what we have, whether that be the relationships we enjoy or the material goods we possess for the brief moments we have on earth, to engage the world and to build communities of compassion and to free ourselves for that important work, then we have used our resources well and have followed the path.

It is of course very easy to use this way of understanding what is said here today as a vindication of the middle class values the vast majority of us share, and I don't mean to be doing that, though there is nothing inherently deficient or wrong with those values. I mean rather that we here are all called to a kind of freedom of attitude and action that most of us are afraid to embrace lest we lose the things we believe we have to have in order to survive. Today we hear that we don't need to live in that kind of fear, that in fact such fears inhibit us and prevent our full appreciation of the life to which God has called us regardless of whatever other values we may have. To be free is to use what we have for the sake of the kingdom, rather than to serve what we have

for the sake of the security it brings us. The call is to freedom, which is the life of the kingdom.